

August 29, 2010, Pent +14

Luke 14:1-14

ktv@trc

With impressive audacity, one of our summer interns, Jeff Knol, preached from the somewhat difficult Hebrews passage last Sunday.

In comparison, I kept rolling with the gospel of Luke last Sunday at Bethlehem Lutheran Church, a congregation somewhat like ours over in the Heartside neighborhood of Grand Rapids.

Last week's text from Luke was yet another confrontation with the Pharisees and yet another healing story on the Sabbath.

The woman healed in last Sunday's text had been bent over for 18 long years—possibly spinal bifida or complications from polio maybe even cp?

She cheered God's very name after being exalted (lifted up) by Christ whereas the Pharisee jeered Christ's very name after being humbled by this young rabbi from Nazareth.

Not only was Jesus threatening this Pharisee's very grasp on power, but this rag-tag, Jesus character was challenging his very notion of who God is and how God even works.

For Jesus, God wasn't some bind-the-curtain, Holy Other who was more concerned with perfectly crossed t's and immaculately dotted l's—no, Jesus was revealing a God who pounces into human history with enormous passion and conviction.

For Jesus, laws and ceremonies and entire lives for that matter, are to always bend around and serve those deeper purposes and pleasures of God.

In other words, we must go deeper into the spirit of the law to understand a God hungering for a living, breathing relationship with us that goes way beyond some legalistic tight-rope act.

The woman bent over for 18 years experienced someone who cared enough to see a Sabbath day worship service as a marvelous time to share with her God's liberating love.

Of course, it was at a different synagogue on a different Sabbath day that Jesus preached that first public sermon telling the world what God was doing through his ministry:

to bring good news to the poor;

to proclaim release to the captives;

recovery of sight to the blind;

to free the oppressed;

and to the proclaim loudly and boldly that God's time has come.

Isn't that why this woman was so jubilant that day?

God's time had come with personal power and passion.

She knew it.

This jubilant woman had experienced nothing less than its first-fruits.

Today's text brings Jesus into the home of a leader of the Pharisees—this is a higher-up, a mucky/muck is how some might put it.

Verse 1 also tells us that other lawyers and Pharisees were also around the table pouring over Christ's every move and word.

This wasn't because they wanted to emulate the good rabbi, rather this grittier examination spoke to that escalating tension and distrust between Jesus and those religious leaders.

They knew that their grasp upon power was quickly relinquishing as the crowds increasingly danced in Christ's growing popularity.

It is into this thick tension that another healing opportunity presented itself, as someone with fluid retention comes into their presence.

Jesus antes up by asking these religious workers whether or not he could heal this man since it was the Sabbath.

They said and did nothing.

Not so with Jesus, as our savior once again shared the living, breathing first-fruits of God's Reign with this man—who, through Christ's actions, is now physically and spiritually relieved from such painful pressure.

Like the woman bent-over in pain, he, too, could now live in the intended liberation of God's love.

Jesus then doubles down with these religious leaders in asking if they would pull their own oxen or, for that matter, their very own children out of a well if one should fall down the shaft on a Sabbath.

Wouldn't you even save your own child in such a scenario, Jesus asked?

Do you have a heartbeat?

Are you even human?

Their silence was both deafening and revealing.

Not even your own child.

Still seated with this larger crew of lawyers and Pharisees in that home of a mucky/muck, Jesus is able to reverse the focus of examination—as he now watched how their actions spoke even louder than their apathetic silence.

Specifically, Jesus watched how they jockeyed for positions of honor in where they sat at that table.

Remember the context: this jockeying is immediately after doing nothing for a man ailing from difficult pain.

It is immediately after saying nothing in regards to saving their own children when a father's help is most needed.

It is immediately after eyeing Jesus with daggers and hoping that he messes up enough for them to publically paint him as heretical or maybe even hysterical.

Despite their posture of propriety and religious right-ness, these leaders were still elbowing and trying to simply better their careers and further their ambitions.

I picture a slightly more dignified scene at that table akin to the opening of some big-box store the day after Thanksgiving where it is eat-or-be-eaten crowd mentality scrapping and scrapping through those doors.

Is this really what being a disciple is all about?

Is this what the world needs from those of us chosen to be salt and light to the nations?

Is this how God wants us to be agents of reconciliation?

--By legalistically knit-picking around our responsibilities to those suffering in our very presence?

--By selfishly stepping on the necks others to get ahead?

--By puffing out our own chests to try and become something that we aren't so that we can achieve something that doesn't even matter mater in God's ultimate calculus of life and faith?

--By boiling it all down to a self-preservation mentality: Eat or be eaten?

Before God pushed me towards seminary I was convinced that partisan politics was my calling.

I poured myself into this calling—sometimes with a little too much zealotry.

For instance, I was the Teaching Assistant for a campaign management class at Hope where I arranged opportunities for other students to work with candidates hitting the streets, working telephone banks, and doing basic political organizing.

I did all of this work with mixed motivations—a good grade, respect from my professors and the like are worthy desires within perspective; but in fuller honesty, my greater motivations during this season of life involved the less noble aims of making a name for myself as quickly and forcefully as possible.

In the spirit of confession, there was much more pride in all of this than altruistic goals of caring for others through electing good politicians.

In looking out for myself first, I was the type of eager young politico who would elbow others in order to play the game to win.

In one such example that still haunts me, I chose not to attend wonderful weekend to Chicago already planned by Gretchen and her friends so that I could spend yet another Friday night up in some smoky hall up in Muskegon literally dancing with State Senators and city commissioners.

I even did so with slick-backed hair and a bow-tie, back then.

Gretchen has never fully forgiven me for that one— she was right to be angry because my motivations were not aligned with what really mattered.

Jesus is obviously critiquing such less than noble motivations, and he does so by returning to the use of a parable.

First off, notice that our Savior changes the context: instead of being a Pharsee's dining room on the Sabbath, Jesus talks about being invited to a Wedding Banquet.

Here Jesus is sliding to the time and space of God's heavenly feast.

This image was already used in chapter 13 in describing persons from east, west, north and south gathering and dining within the Kingdom of God.

This image is used further in this chapter and over in Chapter 22 of Matthew's gospel.

It is a well-used scriptural image that draws from other passages describing Christ as the bridegroom, the church as the bride, and everlasting life as a huge meal with God and others— rich food, great drink, overflowing cups.

In other words, by describing a wedding feast, Jesus is describing the eschatological vision of us forever being with God and God forever being with us.

--This was no ordinary meal, Jesus is describing here.

--Nor is the one offering the invitation an ordinary host.

Let's just say that Jesus is describing himself as hosting this meal.

Let's even say that he meant what was said earlier over in chapter 6 when he talked about a restored reality where the poor inherit the kingdom, where the hungry will be filled, where those weeping will laugh, where those persecuted for following Christ will receive due reward, where those who sit on dusty floors and crowded hospitals and NICU cribs will be sitting on nothing less than wonderful thrones.

Sure enough, Jesus was challenging those religious leaders who avoided and ignored the plight of the woman bent over in pain for 18 years and the man agonizing with fluid retention, yet in very next breath somehow think that God would let them bump up to first class ahead of such persons at the heavenly table of judgment and justice.

It is if Jesus was turning to them with an incredulous look in the use of this parable...

Really, prophets and religious mucky-mucks, do you think that this type of host wants to sit next to those who would ignore the needs of their own children?

Do you really think that this very host who suffered and died upon a cross for the sins of others, wants to encourage people to simply live life for the sake of themselves?

For that matter, does anyone really think that this host who came to bring hope to the hopeless and direction to the lost would rather see people dance their way up social mobility with dance partners named self, pride, greed, or apathy?

Jesus ends this parable with the wisdom that echoes both Proverbs 25 and his famed sermon from chapter 6... those who exalt themselves will be humbled, yet those who humble themselves will be exalted.

Of course, humility itself is a rather difficult value or way of being to ever fully master.

In fact, it may be inherently impossible to master humility.

Once we think we "get it," then poof—it isn't really humility anymore, is it?

So, instead I'd like to think about humility as our willingness to join Jesus, to simply accept the invitation from the host to the banquet table itself.

Because when we worry less about punching our own dance ticket and releasing more and more of our control over how to dance, then it will also be that much easier to see where Jesus, himself, sat and ate with when on earth.

Where exactly did our chief example of humility and selfless love sit and eat?

It was at the table of the hated tax collector and cheat.

It was at the well of a woman known for less noble reasons.

It was in a room in Emmaus with two journeying companions.

It was at wedding feasts.

It was in Mary and Martha's very home.

It was on the ground with over 5,000 hungry-turned-overly fed men, women and children.

It was at beach-side fish fries with those very flawed disciples who too often abandoned and denied Jesus when the going got tough.

It was lepers and outcasts and prostitutes and others who never held seats of honor or drank from goblets of gold.

Rather, Jesus ate and sat next to the very same types of people he preached about in that first sermon in his hometown synagogue:

The under-loved.

The lost.

The hurting.

The seekers.

The abused.

The captive.

The forgotten.

The hungry.

The persecuted.

The meek.

Even persons, like myself and yourself, who needed plenty of second chances.

Throughout his public ministry and especially through the cross, Jesus constantly found ways of sitting at their tables so that they could enjoy the type of grace served at God's wider banquet table of salvation and restoration and redemption.

So in the end, I find it helpful to talk about humility as our continual acceptance of the host's invitation to that radically new and exciting journey of not only finding new seating arrangements but also new meal companions altogether—

people like that woman bent over for 18 long years,

and that man pressured up with fluid retention,

and that drunk you saw stumbling down Leonard Avenue late last night,
and that drifting soul sitting in the county jail this afternoon,
and that teenager who dreads the start of school because it means another year of insults and sitting alone at lunch,
and everyone else twisting in the various stratospheres of life and faith itself.

All who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves and live, like Christ, for the sake of others, they will be exalted.

Let us pray.